

Spring 1995

# Ceremonies of Separation in Australian Literature

T. G. Bishop

*Case Western Reserve University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

**Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.**

## Recommended Citation

Bishop, T. G. (1995) "Ceremonies of Separation in Australian Literature," *The Kentucky Review*: Vol. 12 : No. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol12/iss3/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Kentucky Libraries at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Kentucky Review by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact [UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu](mailto:UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu).

## Ceremonies of Separation in Australian Literature

---

*T. G. Bishop*

"What else should our lives be but a series of beginnings . . ."

David Malouf

What becomes of a literature that must use the tools of an older culture in a new environment, whether physical, social or spiritual? This was once the challenge faced by English writers such as Spenser and Milton, "an age too late" in the "cold climate" of Europe's remote northwest. More recently, the colonial expansion of English culture into corners of the world far from Britain has revived the question and all its attendant anxieties. The intersection of a received European culture with the particular historical and geographical conditions of colonial settlement has produced in Australia a literature preoccupied with separation. Australia's geographical and social isolation from Europe is certainly fundamental, but is only a starting point awaiting articulation into some sort of consciousness. In itself it does not determine any particular response, as a comparison with American literature shows. In Australian writing readers see the image of "exile from Eden" and the uncertain wait of those who have suffered it for a language adequate to their new situation. The task of translating devastating separation into a literary opportunity was uniquely difficult for Australia, afflicting writing with a persistent disorientation and the loss of a language in which to be "at home." The longing for home, whether as nostalgia or wan expectation, has shaped a whole suite of gestures in works from popular songs and ballads to recent Koori (Australian aboriginal) attempts to reclaim a lost heritage.

The first responses of colonists and convicts to the Great South Land emerged from ideas about distance, separation and displacement within which "Australia" had long been an object for



the European imagination. These responses attempted either to find consoling figures for their terrible dislocation or to explain the unavailability of such consolation. We have few records of what the first convicts thought of the land to which they had been sentenced for anything from seven years to life (in practice the former was often longer). Their jailers and other non-convict settlers were understandably more interested in eking livings than meanings out of this strange land and its stranger fauna. The eye of an Australian imagination might have opened on a new, pre-Ovidian world of kangaroo and koala metamorphs. However, this seems to have required more vigor or independence than the earliest Australian writers could summon. An interesting witness here is the 1819 poem, "The Kangaroo," by Barron Field—a name that seems grimly apt. The notorious first rhyme is indicative of the poem's struggle between lapse and redemption:

Kangaroo, Kangaroo!  
 Thou spirit of Australia,  
 That redeems from utter failure,  
 From perfect desolation,  
 And warrants the creation  
 Of this fifth part of the Earth,  
 Which should seem an after-birth,  
 Not conceiv'd in the Beginning  
 (For GOD bless'd his work at first,  
 And saw that it was good),  
 But emerg'd at the first sinning,  
 When the ground was therefore curst;-  
 And hence this barren wood!<sup>1</sup>

Field's own failure to provide an adequate object for his verb "redeems" is an indication of his struggle. The stanza begins in celebration but quickly relapses into a terrible myth of Australian genesis which leaves us standing uncertainly in the middle of a "barren wood." Field makes Australia in every sense belated in world history—an outgrowth or chaotic by-product of European genesis, an "after-birth."<sup>2</sup> Australia's emergence simultaneous with the Fall of Man makes it the sign of exile *par excellence*, its very existence an index of the distance that separates us from Paradise. A land needing redemption, like the humanity whose fate it memorializes, can have no true originating force or spirit. It can

only hark back in a spirit of loss. Its barren appearance is admonitory, recalling by its very aspect the voice of the angry Northern God revising his original benediction to pronounce the primal curse.

Field at first announces that he has found in the kangaroo a wonderful redeemer for the cursed ground. Yet though he entertains an astonished affection for the animal, this cannot sustain the redemptive burden and lapses into a comic myth in which a bizarre recombinant zoology assembles the kangaroo out of miscellaneous leftovers. Field looks back to bits of his old familiar home to explain it:

[Nature] had made the squirrel fragile;  
She had made the bounding hart;  
But a third so strong and agile  
Was beyond ev'n Nature's art.  
So she join'd the former two  
In thee, Kangaroo!

Squirrel and hart in more or less harmonious conjunction, this consoling totem of Australia can only be explained by already existing originals elsewhere. It is the afterthought of a Nature out of imaginative resource.

From the ruin of "first sinning" Field's poem wants to conjure this "spirit" as the *genius loci* of an Australian imaginative order, and then use it to repair the damage of dislocation. Field hails the kangaroo as a new counterpart to the myths of classical Greece, and even suggests the possibility of a new epic for the South Land:

Sphynx or mermaid realiz'd,  
Or centaur unfabulous,  
Would scarce be more prodigious,  
Or Labyrinthine Minotaur,  
With which great Theseus did war,  
Or Pegasus poetical,  
Or hippogriff—chimeras all!

But neither Field nor his jog-trot verses can keep up this route into an imaginative *terra nova*. "Unfabulous" seems the aptest word for his endeavor, and the one that tells most: it is an imaginative



opportunity missed apparently because it is so literally *there*. By the poem's end, the kangaroo is merely a rather odd animal, an amiable alternative quarry for the Antipodean country squire: "Better-proportioned animal/ More graceful or ethereal/ Was never followed by the hound." Lithe it may be, but full of imaginative potential it is not—instead Field recreates a nostalgic English hunting scene to compensate the weirdness of his exile.

Field's inability to conjure an adequate spirit out of the persistently physical kangaroo is symptomatic of the grudging literality of the world an Australian writer faced. It seems almost as though the imagination has been foreclosed, bereft of a language for its predicament. Early American settlers had a theology with which to make sense of the difficulty of the new land. For them, the cold of New England was a bracing lesson to despise the body and embrace the soul whose image burned through in the apocalyptic reds and golds of each returning fall. But the physical stringencies of life in Australia, whether convict or "free," were rather a lesson about the body's endless presence, its pain and its untranscendability. In Field's poem, Australia is not a land progressing towards salvation through faith and grace, but one perpetually harking back to the very moment of sinning and loss, an eternally deathly reminder of the Exile. When "our first parents" were cast out of Eden, they took with them a Promise that sustained. At the Fall into Australia, the convicts rely on no such Promise.

Field's failed attempt to find a language of myth for the kangaroo demonstrates the strain Australia first placed on European literary habits. Literary terms perfectly "at home" in England did not look or feel the same under an *aurora australis*. Could an Australian speaker, for example, ever use "transport" as a metaphor for sublimity without awareness of the grim sentences of "transportation" which had first established the colony?<sup>3</sup> The very possibility of English as a language, let alone a literature, had in some sense been transported, and displacement became a condition to confront and, if possible, resolve.

The sense of separation ramified at once in several, sometimes contrary, directions. The tremendous distance which guaranteed the practical effectiveness of "transportation" as a penal policy also forced on the emigré an inevitable sense of "secondariness." No news was ever new by the time it arrived.<sup>4</sup> Partly as a consequence of its convict history, this geographical isolation from Britain soon



became the index of a political and social "distancing," an idea that continued to influence long after transportation ceased as a formal policy. Hence in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth century, "Australia" remained the place to which bankrupts and social reprobates were assigned, for example, by English high comedy, with a certain tactful distaste.<sup>5</sup> Distance was not merely a fact, but a condition, which continued to bear the mark of expulsion.

This allegory of distance was the more pervasive and effective because of several prepared narratives which had conferred on "Australia" particular meanings even before anything specific was known about it. What an Australia "ought" to be had long been imagined as part of a Europe-centered narrative of world history. To "discover" Australia was therefore not to encounter something unutterably new, but at last to confront an uncanny apparition for which there was a place prepared by the whole history of Western thought. Something like it had always existed as an implied counterpart to Europe, a necessary consequence of imagining the development of the European.<sup>6</sup> Australia's actual appearance was, from this point of view, no surprise at all, and its "harsh" climate, "bizarre" fauna, "primitive" population and Antipodean geography at once fulfilled expectation and enabled its use as a dumping-ground to purge and refine Northern civility.

Yet as the colonists confronted the rumor of themselves and Australia itself as Europe's degenerate and cursed counterpart, they simultaneously experienced Australia as primordial, a pre-European land. From the first characterizations, Australia is associated not only with remote distance, but also with the remote past. To Western eyes it was as though history had never happened; the expulsion from the Garden, as Field saw, was still the most recent event. Unlike those who encountered India or Africa, Europeans in Australia could see no tradition demanding at least negotiation, if not accommodation and even cultural and economic exchange. The lives of aboriginal Australians never achieved the status of a "culture" to their European conquerors. They remained on the contrary, and no doubt conveniently, a next-to-nothing, if not a complete nothing. For the European colonist, the encounter with native Australians reinforced the feeling of displacement, as though he or she had been suddenly returned to the distant past. The stubborn intractability of both land and native people to European-style "cultivation" continued to discourage compensatory fictions of either the "pastoral retreat" or



the "enlightened liberator" variety.<sup>7</sup> Without discounting other economic and social factors in their subsequent exploitation, it is possible that Australian aboriginals were too much like what many early settlers wished most of all *not* to acknowledge of themselves. If this grim irony is part of the truth, the destruction of the native inhabitants that followed settlement appears not merely a suppression, but also a repression.

The short stories of Henry Lawson are often taken by Australians themselves to mark the emergence of an independent Australian voice in fiction: cocky, hard-bitten, down-to-earth. Literary histories of Australia most often associate Lawson with the "nationalist" controversies of the 1890s centered on the Sydney periodical "The Bulletin." Yet these stories can be shown to belie their own more assertive gestures through their powerful attraction to themes of separation, whether by death or distance, and by their unanswered longing for a language to manage separation's traumas. Many of Lawson's powerful stories rely on separation from an original plenitude or on uneasy confrontation with death. These scenes give the stories their characteristically blank-faced sentimentality. Lawson's stories seek but cannot enunciate fully adequate ceremonies to mark their separations, and they remain in the end uncertain of their relation to the loss, and of the way loss marks them.

Lawson often focuses on the displaced and nomadic society (most often male) of the Australian outback. This world is one of continuous and ultimately aimless transience: swagmen, shearers, laborers, dogs drift endlessly about the landscape to little result. "You can only depend on getting tucker [food] *once* at one place; then you must tramp on to the next. . . . To live you must walk. To cease walking is to die."<sup>8</sup> So says "Stragglers," a story whose title refers at once to its unemployed characters and to the sheep they vaguely hope to get work shearing "somewhere."

In the world of "Stragglers" separation and loss are inevitable but no less distressing for that. All the more so since they seem so very ordinary. Scenes of burial and interment in Lawson continue to present a definite and recognizable terminus. Lawson's prose weighs at the same time the character of his people's responses, and the resources available to his wry style for the same task. His mixture of low comedy, ironic sentiment, portentous announcement and sheer weirdness stems from the search for a style of ceremony to suit at once the ordinariness and the extremity of these occasions.



"The Bush Undertaker" sketches the Australian graveside in solitary and eccentric tones. The tale recounts an anonymous bushman's activities around the burial of his ne'er-do-well sometime associate "Brummy," discovered three months' dead and mummified in the open bush, attended by a "great black goanna" [a large native lizard]. Fragmentary formulae from the *Book of Common Prayer* intrude at the burial, at once inappropriate and compulsory, the bushman thinks. But neither the dog, Five Bob, nor Lawson seem convinced:

The dog arose, with ears erect, and looked anxiously first at his master and then into the grave.

"Theer oughter be somethin' sed," muttered the old man, "'tain't right to put 'im under like a dog. Theer oughter be some sort o' sarmin." He sighed heavily in the listening silence that followed this remark and proceeded with his work. He filled the grave to the brim this time, and fashioned the mound carefully with his spade. Once or twice he muttered the words, "I am the rassaraction." As he laid the tools quietly aside, and stood at the head of the grave, he was evidently trying to remember something that ought to be said. He removed his hat, placed it carefully on the grass, held his hands out from his sides and a little to the front, drew a long, deep breath, and said with a solemnity that greatly disturbed Five Bob: "Hashes ter hashes, dus ter dus, Brummy—an'—an' in hopes of a great an' gerlorious rassaraction!"<sup>9</sup>

The comic and grotesque effort to announce human meaning through a specific ceremonial order is not just "local color," but registers the tension between old forms and new scenes, between the strain of remembering and the inadequacy of what is remembered to cover present needs. Lawson points to "the grand Australian bush" as the generator of these distortions—"the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird."

Lawson's famous story, "The Drover's Wife," resumes the tactic of the missing from another angle, and delivers a tragic picture of a moment where withdrawal into the stoic and the inarticulate has not yet been concluded. It concerns a woman whose husband has left his family to seek work, and her struggles to maintain herself and her children in the poverty of an isolated bush house. Her spouse may even be dead for all she knows. One evening a



poisonous snake gets into the house and her vigil to kill it becomes the occasion for a résumé of her life's hardships and terrors. But the tale reaches its climax not in the final dawn death of the marauder at the woman's hands, but in her young son's outburst of resentment against the family's *de facto* abandonment by his drover father. This area of feeling the story has concealed through its account of the mother's struggles against fire, flood, famine and intruders, before the final straw of the snake, but it now breaks through in a scene that comes both too late and too early to do any good. Pathetically, the child attempts both to substitute for and rebuke his absent father:

The dirty-legged boy stands for a moment in his shirt, watching the fire. Presently he looks up at her, sees the tears in her eyes, and, throwing his arms around her neck, exclaims: "Mother, I won't never go drovin'; blast me if I do."

And she hugs him to her worn-out breast and kisses him; and they sit thus together while the sickly daylight breaks over the bush.<sup>10</sup>

The power of the climax derives from an exile even from this meager community we know the child glimpses and will resist in vain, and hence engage in as readers before the fact: the sickly daylight is our bitter knowledge that the family scene itself will soon be broken, that the child is calling down a curse upon himself.<sup>11</sup>

Lawson's stories wear their bluff independence well, but often it masks a deeper uncertainty resulting from the keen perception of loss, severance and mortality at the root of Australian experience. For this condition Lawson shapes a language of hesitations, understatements and omissions that remains somewhat brittle.

The burden of separation and the desire for some reunion with a distant original manifests itself in many Australian place-names. Though often superficially similar to counterparts in the American colonies, European names on Australian tongues are emotionally and connotatively a world away. There "New England" and "New South Wales" remain as much bad jokes as anything; so many names are associated with atrocity, anger and guilt. Botany Bay, Hobart Town, Port Arthur, Moreton Bay, Norfolk Island were always names for violence and brutality. When designating the landscape of their necessity, Australian geographers tended to be



grim and even abusive: Disaster Bay, Cape Catastrophe, Mount Buggery.<sup>12</sup>

Novelist Patrick White's Australian characters recurrently find themselves facing the recalcitrance of a world of naming which can offer only inadequate expressive means for the intensity and strangeness of their own peculiar being. Yet their words remain an ineluctable part of that being, managing it and its expression even as their inadequacy to satisfy it is registered. This double impulse towards and away from language manifests itself in the dense and repetitive use of symbolic images for which White's style is so well-known. Though in most respects very different, White's work shares with Lawson's stories a recurrent restlessness of relation to its world. In White however, we confront a deeper fissuring in the structure of naming itself.

*The Aunt's Story* is White's first work to show these traits in developed form. The aunt in question is Theodora Goodman, and her three-part story recounts in turn her rural childhood and adult attendance on an aging mother, her sojourn at a hotel in the South of France after her mother's death, and her final wandering off the return journey to a mountain hut somewhere in the American West, where awkward, dowdy Aunt Theo gradually drifts into the obscure revelations of what appears to be insanity. Theodora frequently says and does things incomprehensible to those around her, and the peculiar quality of her perceptions is registered carefully by White's prose. In the tent of a carnival shooting gallery, for instance, Theodora takes the gun from her scoreless male companions and appalls their postcard girlfriends by using it:

"Have you been hiding your talents, Theodora?," Marion asked.

But Theodora took the rifle, closing her eyes to the glare. She stood already in the canvas landscape against which the ducks jerked, her canvas arms animated by some emotion that was scarcely hers. Because the canvas moments will come to life of their own accord, whether it is watching the water flow beneath a bridge, or listening to hands strike music out of wood. . . . She took aim, and the dead, white, discarded moment fell shattered, the duck bobbed headless.<sup>13</sup>

Theodora's violence is against the separateness of the "discarded moments." She at once acts out her own hardness against her failure to find a language of proper being and creates a vicious



parody of how *their* world appears to her: one of cheap, deadened moments, callous fragments in a mechanical, jerky row.

White's writing breaks up the usual continuities between the stages of the story, defies the grammar of things, suggesting by violence of both style and incident a secret continuum which slips behind or between the words, to move through other, more fluid media, such as light, water or music. No "moment" can achieve the solidity of an integrated act of naming without betraying these currents. Some more perfect homogeneity between consciousness and the physical, temporal world is what Theodora seems to desire. But this desire appears only through a violence directed at the "ordinary" world of linguistic mediation, a violence springing from a profound dislocation at the root of language:

They did not know what any of this might signify. They watched the clay ducks shatter each time Theodora fired, and it was as if each time, a secret life was shattered, of which they had not been aware, and probably never would have, but they resented the possibility removed. It was something mysterious, shameful, grotesque. What can we say now? they felt.

Just before the death of Theodora's mother, where the first part of the novel begins and closes, occurs another passage which illuminates the purpose of these peculiar twistings of style:

At this point, Theodora sometimes said, I should begin to read Gibbon, or find religion, instead of speaking to myself in my own room. But words, whether written or spoken, were at most frail slat bridges over chasms.[. . .] So it will not be by these means, Theodora said, that the great monster Self will be destroyed, and that desirable state achieved, which resembles, one would imagine, nothing more than air or water.<sup>14</sup>

Words have an impossible task. They at once create and thwart the desire for their own abolition. Without them, the chasm might never have been known, yet as long as they are present, it cannot be fully plumbed. In their particulateness they create and maintain "the great monster Self" over against the sought fluidity of air or water. And would it also cease with them? But would we then



know the abyss? Or something else beyond both? We must abandon them, destroy them to find out. The novel therefore works gradually towards the image of its own words at last torn up and left behind.

That this sense of separation has a primal character for Theodora is made clear on the novel's first page, where she stands ("at last") before her mother's coffin, moving objects around "with some surprise, as if divorced from her own hands, as if they were related to the objects beneath them only in the way that two flies, blowing and blundering in space, are related to a china and mahogany world."<sup>15</sup> Here she also feels "her own name spilt stiff and hollow out of the dusty horn of an old phonograph." Theodora is at once alienated from and acutely conscious of the material texture of the world, but names will not bring her into any satisfactory relation to it: naming is a cornucopia gone mechanical and dry.

Why this rage against words? How does the novel account for its own penchant for this savagery and distrust? The scene of mourning over the corpse of her mother will prove only a correlative for some deeper "pathology" in her relation to language, narrative and self. As the novel proceeds backward to an account of Theodora's growing up, the distancing through which names bring the world to expression emerges for Theodora associated irrevocably with death, and that deathwardness has a specifically Australian resonance. The family home and farm—"Meroë" (also the name of the novel's first part)—is the crucial instance. As the locus of origin, Meroë names Theodora's "place" at first. But Meroë turns out to be a double name, a name already implicated in ancient networks of which Theodora can know nothing. Meroë, she is informed by her father, is the name of the ancient Kushite capital of Upper Egypt, associated in the novel with Ethiopia or Abyssinia. One important mythographic tradition holds that this was the region of humanity's original home, and hence of the Paradisal garden.<sup>16</sup> Learning the "culture" of the name effects for Theodora a traumatic splitting of origins, one in ancient Abyssinia and one in its double, Australia. The double name has had a corrosive, divisive effect: "[A]long with the other exotic names, . . . [Meroë had] eaten into the gnarled and aboriginal landscape and become a part of it. . . . Only the hills round Meroë had conspired with the name, to darken, or to split deeper open their black rock, or to frown with a fiercer, Ethiopian intensity." When this ancient, secret grounding of her world on a set of



intertextual relations is revealed to Theodora in her father's study, surrounded by the tomes of "Herodotus and Homer," it generates a deadly rift and a desperate flight:

"There is another Meroë, said Father, "a dead place, in the black country of Ethiopia."

Her hands were cold on the old spotted paper of the complicated books, because she could not, she did not wish to, believe in the second Meroë. She could not set down on the black grass of the country that was called Ethiopia their own yellow stone. In this dead place that Father had described the roses were as brown as paper bags, the curtains were ashy on their rings, the eyes of the house had closed.

"I shall go outside now," Theodora said.

Because she wanted to escape from this dead place with the suffocating cinder breath. She looked with caution at the yellow face of the house, at the white shells in its placid, pocked stone. Even in sunlight the hills surrounding Meroë were black. Her own shadow was rather a suspicious rag. So that from what she saw and sensed, the legendary landscape became a fact, and she could not break loose from an expanding terror.<sup>17</sup>

This discovery of the father's language reveals a doubled narrative of origin for Theodora only by killing the immediate world. Theodora is attached irresistibly and terribly by her father's naming, and though she regains her freedom to love the first Meroë as "something to touch," the secret double remains as "a dim and accepted apprehension lying quietly at the back of her mind." Language and death together mediate the crossing between direct experience and the tasks of culture, here imagined as the great gap between Australia and Abyssinia, "something to touch" and the infinitely expanding terror of the world's banishment by someone else's words. The split, volcanic hills around Meroë become insufficiently stable ground for Theodora to build a concrete world for herself: "Things were always tumbling down. Some things were done up again with wire. But mostly they just lay."

Learning the father's antecedent names kills the world before Theodora's eyes. By fusing in the moment of Theodora's discovery the intimation of a world of death doubling this one and an oblique



narrative of expulsion from Paradise, White returns to a primal myth of European Australia as a landscape of exile tied by the deadly laws of its progenitors. Touched by Old World naming, the "aboriginal" takes on a "frowning, Ethiopian intensity," suggesting how landscape and native inhabitants together took a negative connotation from the language of the European father. Theodora's path through the novel is marked by continual resistance to this inheritance, where even to speak "normally" the names everyone knows is to have conceded defeat.

While Theodora's sister Fanny has no trouble proclaiming her name in large capitals in her "broidery," Theodora moves circumspectly through a world "in which rocks might at any moment open, or words convey meaning." She must negotiate her experience both through and *against* the claims of her language. Her sidelong world cuts across given categories to note other associations. When she brings an offering of eggs to the family's maid, Pearl, the latter "stroked the swallows' eggs and where her blouse dipped down there were two little speckles like the speckles on an egg." Theodora and White note such correspondences in an attempt to explore what mental activity might be like when educed from before or beyond words, through direct correspondences, to bring back a non-linguistic world as yet uncursed as "something to touch."<sup>18</sup>

*The Aunt's Story* characterizes the Australian always by choosing the eccentric over the central, the excrescent over the integrated, the victim over the victor. An image of Theodora as Australian might be found in the following scene in her school chapel:

On the side against which the girls from Spofforth's sat there was a window with St. George. He was mild and smooth as yellow soap, but he had crushed the Dragon. Out of the Dragon's belly had burst peculiar bunches of crimson grapes. The window sanctified the light, which poured rich and bland and purple . . . Theodora washed her hands in purple. She listened coolly to the words that did not touch. Her own mystery offered subtler variations.<sup>19</sup>

It is the Dragon that suffers the Passion here, and the light shining through his boiling intestines that fructifies and dyes Theodora's experience. Her "subtler variations" consist in strings of just such dismemberments of a European unitary "body of discourse," recorded lexically, psychologically, and narratively in the novel's



difficulty. These reachings after a gesture for which there is no orderly intelligible context are the counterpart of Lawson's failures of gesture in more definite circumstances.

In the second part of the novel, Theodora journeys to the Europe that generated the language of the father in the first place. In a cliché of Australian longing and story, she returns to "the Old World." Indeed the title of the section suggests that she has returned even further—back to the roots of the Australian exile myth, to the very "Jardin Exotique" itself. But this garden turns out to be the stale and artificial courtyard of the Hotel du Midi on the Cote-d'Azur in the late 1930s, where a party of faded, papery ghosts from European literature gather in advance of their extinction: "Throughout the gothic shell of Europe, in which there had never been such a buying and selling, of semi-precious aspirations, bulls' blood and stuffed doves, the stone arches cracked, the aching wilderness, in which the ghosts of Homer and St. Paul and Tolstoy waited for the crash."<sup>20</sup> In this very French hotel abide Alyosha Sokolnikov, the mad Russian general, and Madame Rapallo, the rich American widow with her absent, concucted Principessa daughter; "les Demoiselles Bloch," identical twin practical-jokers who worry about Communism or Fascism; Wetherby, the young English schoolmaster-poet, and Lieselotte, the decadent German countess, now cast off by her Wagnerian jackbooted husband. Theodora's involvement with the characters who inhabit this pre-apocalyptic romance forest is plastic and phantasmatic. She drifts in and out of intimate encounters, nocturnal struggles over totemic objects, charged but indistinct scenes from the pasts of her fellow guests. The scene ends in an oneiric conflagration which melts the artificial garden that has dominated the hotel:

Now she saw it was, in fact, the garden that prevailed, its forms had swelled and multiplied, its dry, paper hands were pressed against the windows of the *salle à manger*, perhaps it had already started to digest the body of the somnolent hotel.<sup>21</sup>

This deep dream-world of European literature Theodora both colludes with and repudiates. It is a kind of romance ordeal she must endure in order to purge and leave behind. With the outbreak of war which this fire imagines, the entire hothouse garden of

Eur  
up  
N  
Au  
The  
ent  
in h  
Am  
apo  
pro  
the  
pre  
wh  
"to  
urg  
Hay  
and  
clos  
"bla  
lan  
per  
A  
lan  
any  
vict  
just  
win  
She  
yet  
wh

nov  
is t  
lite



European letters, importuning, demanding and dominating, goes up in a crackle of flame.

Yet having endured the stultification of the everyday in Australia and the sirenic infatuations of the European dreaming, Theodora has only one place left to go: the older, but perhaps less entrapped "New World" which had also called to D.H. Lawrence in his search for the unencumbered. Theodora's encounter with America strikes from the first notes of clarity, daring and apocalyptic hope in which White responds to the ever-early promise of American renewal: "All through the middle of America there was a trumpeting of corn. Its full, yellow tremendous notes pressed close to the swelling sky. There were whole acres of time in which yellow corn blared as if for a judgement."<sup>22</sup> The undertaking "to return to Abyssinia" in the third and final section recovers its urgency at last on the higher slopes of a mountain in the Rockies. Having abandoned her train, Theodora rips up her travel tickets and tears out her name "by the roots," in order to move "a little closer to humility, to anonymity, to pureness of being." The word "blank" is increasingly prominent in the novel's descriptive language, suggesting a move towards the abolition of articulated perception and written pages alike.

As Theodora retreats further and further from an intelligible language of common namings, it is clear that the novel cannot seek any ordinary narrative closure. Whether this retreat constitutes a victory or a defeat remains unclear: both terms would be refused as just another pair of little clay ducks. As she stands outside a window looking into a mountain cabin, it is "as if she were dead." She appears to shape herself docilely to the demands of others, and yet within their shadow her singularity keeps safe and separate, where neither names nor narrative can follow her:

So Theodora Goodman took her hat and put it on her head, as it was suggested she should do. Her face was long and yellow under the great black hat. The hat sat straight, but the doubtful rose trembled and glittered, leading a life of its own.<sup>23</sup>

It may be that this is a terrible price for both Theodora and the novel to pay for achieving "a life of its own." The doubtful rose that is the final emblem of both has itself an ancient and complex literary history. What we ought to take from that history in order to



see this rose remains the essence of its doubt: the rose of Sharon, *carpe diem*, *le roman de la rose*, Dante's Heaven, the earthly paradise, *le spectre de la rose*, *der Rosenkavalier*, Schoenberg's "*weisse Wunderrosen*". . . . It is a talisman to a threshold we cannot cross, but that Theodora has crossed. If to imagine that space we must at last put aside the ideas both of origin and paradise (the novel deliberately, frustratingly ends nowhere in particular) and pass into some apocalyptic landscape where such old names cease forever, that is because that language will always carry with it the very conditions that bind Australia to its crippling exilic status and that *must* be subverted in order to liberate Australian life, even at the cost of "Australia" itself.

A similarity of predicament haunts Field's poem, Lawson's story and White's novel: each is concerned with the sense that "the Australian" is displaced from an original Edenic site by an act of death-dealing that has compromised at least, or at worst fractured, the ability of its language to grip the world it faces. In Field's poem this predicament is faced at the level of theme through the (failed) attempt to remythologize the kangaroo as a compensatory emblem. In Lawson's stories of social failure, the uncertainty of tone that divides Field's poem against itself is made a part of the writer's expressive palette.

It might be thought that these examples chart a movement of increasing complexity and even "maturity" in a national literature that will in time "outgrow" the recurrent nightmare of exile and longing. But the developing multi-ethnic character of Australian society in the post-war period and the emergence of writers from the Koori community, while necessarily treating new materials, seem rather to have revised than rejected the impact in Australian writing of these issues. Literary history, like other histories, is not easily shouldered away. Both original inhabitants and post-war immigrant communities, for their own specific reasons and in their own ways, have endured displacement and exile. In seeking literary representation, they too are faced with figures of exile, silence and recovery as a basic condition of their writing and perhaps of their experience. To suggest this is not to deny the widely variant paths of entry into Australian writing taken by immigrant (both old and new) and by aboriginal writers. For the latter especially, the experience of English as a language of occupation and of writing as a technology of the colonizer must be acknowledged. Both of these raise difficult questions about the

nat  
asp  
imr  
Koo  
Joh  
alto  
ges  
care  
rem  
aud  
S  
and  
fam  
and  
succ  
with  
Aus  
sort  
from  
elich  
the  
mot  
cent  
who  
boo  
to r  
shan  
incr  
larg  
rest  
sim  
call  
Abc  
ope  
T  
dire  
mos  
sup  
triu  
"Kn  
an a



nature of an aboriginal writing, but perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the challenge is the question of its similarity to the immigrant grappling with exile and recovery (or its failure). Recent Koori activists, such as Mudrooroo Narogin (formerly Colin Johnson) have wondered whether English must not be abandoned altogether to recover Koori authenticity. The relation of such a gesture to Theodora Goodman's strategy of withdrawal needs to be carefully weighed. Even given the differences, might there not remain some common structures of experience for writers and audiences on both sides?

Some such commonality may help to explain the extraordinary and immediate public success of Sally Morgan's work of Koori family history, *My Place*. The work was first published in July 1987 and was reprinted three times in as many months. Such a popular success may have come as a surprise to many, since the work deals with a particularly sensitive subject for both black and white Australia, one on which both sides have long maintained various sorts of silence. Morgan recounts the slow and painful recovery, from whatever testimonies and documents she could uncover or elicit, of a Koori heritage to claim for herself and her family out of the catastrophe of enforced separation of children from their mothers by successive white Australian governments. *My Place* centers principally on the lives of her mother and grandmother, whose oral narratives, stubbornly withheld for so long, form the book's "telling" climax and the goal of the author's quest. In order to reach it, Morgan must slowly wear her way through decades of shame, denial and fear, each step forward bringing with it a further increment of painful understanding. At the end of the narrative, a large measure of what was occluded, if not obliterated, has been restored to view, or at least to hearing. The book ends simultaneously with the death of Morgan's grandmother and the call heard by Morgan, even if only "in my heart," of "the Aboriginal bird" associated with her grandmother from the opening chapter.

The power of this "history" (as its speakers call it) to move arises directly from its narrative as a literal family romance, with its mostly successful revelation of the true forebears and restoration of suppressed lines of inheritance. *My Place*, once recovered, stands in triumphantly ironic echo of many old voices of social domination: "Know your place, girl." The book's commercial appeal stems from an almost miraculous mitigation of the pathos of distance. In this



way, intentionally or not, *My Place* acts out a powerful scenario also present in European-Australian literature, in finding a path or ceremony to repair an Australian separation. During the course of *My Place* not only is a workable past recovered in the embedded oral histories, but along with them a rehabilitated fullness and particularity of naming for the present. Successful restoration is represented in a renaming with the family's "true" names, according to Koori genealogy codes, in a scene having a decidedly ceremonial air:

Then Billy said, "I think we got it now. You," he said as he pointed to me, "must be Burungu, your mother is Panaka, and Paul, we would make him Malinga. Now this is very important, you don't want to go forgetting this, because we've been trying to work it out ever since you arrived."

Dolly and Peter agreed that those groups were the ones we belonged to.

"You got it straight?" Billy asked.

"I think so," I laughed, as I repeated the names.

"Good!" he said, "because some of the ones that come up here get it all muddled up. We want you to have it straight, because it's very important. We don't want you to go getting tangled up in the wrong group."

"Well, I'm glad we got that sorted out," added Peter, "now you can come here whenever you like. We know who you belong to now. If you ever come here and I'm not around and they tell you to go away, you hold your ground. You just tell them your group and who you're related to. You got a right to be here same as the others.

"That's right," agreed Billy strongly. "You got your place now. We've worked it out. You come here as often as you please. There's always a spot here for you all."<sup>24</sup>

Finding the name and finding the place *against* the white man's rules for social and familial association coincide with recovering the history of how the exile was first pronounced. This preservation of ties also undertakes the work of memory since all three of the older "tellers," Morgan's great-uncle, mother and grandmother, are now dead. *My Place's* work of recovery, its continuity with central scenes of other Australian literature, needs to be understood to see Koori history in relation to the white history with which it is now inextricably bound up.

I  
bee  
seek  
acco  
bac  
earl  
end  
wri  
sep  
The

Sep  
poe  
the  
atte

T  
who  
than

Oxf

prim  
the

Life

(Me

wor  
Mr.  
Rev  
ope  
Aus

I began by asking what the consequences of colonization have been for writing in Australia. Field, Lawson, White and Morgan seek consistently to develop figures and ceremonies for accommodating and responding to displacement. Their works hark back to the experience of exile which influenced so powerfully early readings of Australia, and which continues to do so in enduring and even self-reproducing ways. Various, these writings seek to define forms of separation, but also to overcome separation to create new speech and new places beyond pathos. The Australian poet Judith Wright has written of her task:

Yes, we still can sing  
who reach this barren shore.  
But no note will sound  
as it did before.<sup>25</sup>

Separation brings both longing and promise. Wright assimilates poetry's task of renewal to an echo against time and distance. It is the sound of that distance within the notes we have been attempting to hear.

#### NOTES

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Michael G. Cooke, without whose support and comment it would not have been written. I wish also to thank Kristine Gaston, whose suggestions were invaluable.

<sup>1</sup> Les A. Murray, *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> The irony of the kangaroo's being marsupial (and hence evolutionarily primitive to European fauna) was unavailable to Field, but neatly shows the priorities involved here.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Collins notes this point at the opening of Chapter 2 of his *Such is Life* (1903). It is by now a well-known *locus* of comment.

<sup>4</sup> See, on this subject, Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance* (Melbourne: MacMillan, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, bankrupt younger brother Ernest's choices ("this world, the next world, or Australia") in *The Importance of Being Ernest*, or Mr. Ryder's account of cousin Melchior's "imprudence" in *Brideshead Revisited*, which led to a similar withdrawal. A like incident provides the opening of Martin Boyd's *Lucinda Brayford* (London: Cresset, 1946). Australian entertainers such as Barry Humphries have appropriated this



way, intentionally or not, *My Place* acts out a powerful scenario also present in European-Australian literature, in finding a path or ceremony to repair an Australian separation. During the course of *My Place* not only is a workable past recovered in the embedded oral histories, but along with them a rehabilitated fullness and particularity of naming for the present. Successful restoration is represented in a renaming with the family's "true" names, according to Koori genealogy codes, in a scene having a decidedly ceremonial air:

Then Billy said, "I think we got it now. You," he said as he pointed to me, "must be Burungu, your mother is Panaka, and Paul, we would make him Malinga. Now this is very important, you don't want to go forgetting this, because we've been trying to work it out ever since you arrived."

Dolly and Peter agreed that those groups were the ones we belonged to.

"You got it straight?" Billy asked.

"I think so," I laughed, as I repeated the names.

"Good!" he said, "because some of the ones that come up here get it all muddled up. We want you to have it straight, because it's very important. We don't want you to go getting tangled up in the wrong group."

"Well, I'm glad we got that sorted out," added Peter, "now you can come here whenever you like. We know who you belong to now. If you ever come here and I'm not around and they tell you to go away, you hold your ground. You just tell them your group and who you're related to. You got a right to be here same as the others.

"That's right," agreed Billy strongly. "You got your place now. We've worked it out. You come here as often as you please. There's always a spot here for you all."<sup>24</sup>

Finding the name and finding the place *against* the white man's rules for social and familial association coincide with recovering the history of how the exile was first pronounced. This preservation of ties also undertakes the work of memory since all three of the older "tellers," Morgan's great-uncle, mother and grandmother, are now dead. *My Place's* work of recovery, its continuity with central scenes of other Australian literature, needs to be understood to see Koori history in relation to the white history with which it is now inextricably bound up.

I began by asking what the consequences of colonization have been for writing in Australia. Field, Lawson, White and Morgan seek consistently to develop figures and ceremonies for accommodating and responding to displacement. Their works hark back to the experience of exile which influenced so powerfully early readings of Australia, and which continues to do so in enduring and even self-reproducing ways. Various, these writings seek to define forms of separation, but also to overcome separation to create new speech and new places beyond pathos. The Australian poet Judith Wright has written of her task:

Yes, we still can sing  
who reach this barren shore.  
But no note will sound  
as it did before.<sup>25</sup>

Separation brings both longing and promise. Wright assimilates poetry's task of renewal to an echo against time and distance. It is the sound of that distance within the notes we have been attempting to hear.

#### NOTES

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Michael G. Cooke, without whose support and comment it would not have been written. I wish also to thank Kristine Gaston, whose suggestions were invaluable.

<sup>1</sup> Les A. Murray, *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> The irony of the kangaroo's being marsupial (and hence evolutionarily primitive to European fauna) was unavailable to Field, but neatly shows the priorities involved here.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Collins notes this point at the opening of Chapter 2 of his *Such is Life* (1903). It is by now a well-known *locus* of comment.

<sup>4</sup> See, on this subject, Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance* (Melbourne: MacMillan, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, bankrupt younger brother Ernest's choices ("this world, the next world, or Australia") in *The Importance of Being Ernest*, or Mr. Ryder's account of cousin Melchior's "imprudence" in *Brideshead Revisited*, which led to a similar withdrawal. A like incident provides the opening of Martin Boyd's *Lucinda Brayford* (London: Cresset, 1946). Australian entertainers such as Barry Humphries have appropriated this



comic association for their own ends, enabling them to enjoy successful careers in England.

<sup>6</sup>Edward Said has explored a related logic at work in Western representations of "the Orient" in his *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), but where the Oriental appeared to colonialism as the alternative of the European order, the Australian was its negation (that is, it was no order at all).

<sup>7</sup>For an account of competing judgments regarding Australian Aboriginals among observers on Cook's "Endeavour," I am indebted to James McCusick's "First Encounters: Captain Cook and the Aboriginal People of Australia," an unpublished paper delivered at Common Wealth of Letters conference, Yale University, October 1988. See also Bernard Smith's indispensable *European Vision and the South Pacific*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>8</sup>Henry Lawson, "Stragglers" from *While the Billy Boils* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1896, repr. 1977), pp. 75-6. All quotations from Lawson are from this volume.

<sup>9</sup>Lawson, "The Bush Undertaker," *While the Billy Boils*, p. 212.

<sup>10</sup>Lawson, "The Drover's Wife," *While the Billy Boils*, pp. 155-165.

<sup>11</sup>Loss in Lawson is so normal a state that it can become at once disturbing and comic. In "Brummy Usen" (*While the Billy Boils*, pp. 150-154), a yarn half Gogol, half Borges, an old swagman who may or may not be Brummy, and who may or may not be "an awful old liar," recounts the burial of a false Brummy and the real Brummy's subsequent failure to convince the locals of his continued existence. His name buried, reduced to the status of a awkwardly insistent ghost, he is politely but firmly ignored:

"Well, Brummy hung around for a time, and tried to prove that he wasn't an impostor, but no-one would believe him. He wanted to get some wages that was owing to him.

"He tried the police, but they were just as obstinate as the rest; and beside, they had their dignity to hold up. 'If I ain't Brummy,' he'd say, 'who are I?' But they answered that he knew best. So he did.

"At last he said that it didn't matter much, any road; and so he went away—Lord knows where—to begin life again, I s'pose."

<sup>12</sup>For a more extended account of the history of Australian namings, see Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* (London, Faber, 1987), passim.

<sup>13</sup>Patrick White, *The Aunt's Story* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1963), p. 119. First published in 1948.

<sup>14</sup>White, *The Aunt's Story*, p. 128.

<sup>15</sup>White, p. 11.

<sup>16</sup>The "happy valley" of Abyssinia is also the starting-point for Samuel Johnson's *History of Rasselas*, a fact worth recalling given that White's first novel was entitled *Happy Valley*. *The Aunt's Story*, like *Rasselas*, is an exploration of what lies beyond the boundaries of a placid childhood world.

<sup>17</sup>White, pp. 23-24.

<sup>18</sup> Pearl's touching is associated with fertility and the maternal. Pearl is dismissed from Meroë when she becomes pregnant. By contrast, Theodora's mother exhibits no "touching" impulses. She governs the languages of "society," just as the father does those of literature.

<sup>19</sup> White, p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> White, p. 139.

<sup>21</sup> White, p. 161.

<sup>22</sup> White, p. 255. The whole section is a little-noticed response to American literature by a major writer.

<sup>23</sup> White, p. 287. This is the novel's final sentence.

<sup>24</sup> Sally Morgan, *My Place* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987), pp. 231-32.

<sup>25</sup> Judith Wright, "The Unnecessary Angel", *Collected Poems* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971), p. 296. The poem concludes with a caveat that points also to Theodora Goodman's choice: "Let the song be bare/ That was richly dressed./ Sing with one reserve:/ Silence might be best."